

**The United Theological College**

**Course Title: Methodological and Critical Issues in New Testament Studies (MNT001)**

**Course Faculty: Dr. Johnson Thomaskutty**

**Topic: Jewish Religion: Exilic and Post-Exilic Contexts; Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian, Imperial Religions and Cultures; Formation of Second Temple Judaism.**

**Presenter: Lochumi A. Murry**

**Date: 8<sup>th</sup> July, 2024**

---

**Introduction**

The history of Jewish religion during the Exilic and Post-Exilic periods reveals a story of resilience, adaptation, and transformation amidst significant geopolitical and cultural shifts. Spanning from Assyrian and Babylonian dominance to Persian patronage, this era marked profound changes in Jewish religious identity, shaping the evolution from ancient Israelite practices to Second Temple Judaism. This paper explores these periods, tracing the evolution of Jewish religion and examines interactions with the imperial cultures, highlighting how these encounters influenced theological developments and shaped Jewish communal life

**1. Jewish Religion**

The Jewish Religion is a monotheistic religion and cultural tradition rooted in the covenantal relationship between God and the Israelites, as expressed primarily in the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) and later rabbinic literature. Central tenets include belief in one God (Yahweh), ethical monotheism, the importance of Torah study and observance, and the preservation of Jewish identity through religious practices, community life, and historical consciousness.<sup>1</sup> The Jewish religion in ancient Israel was intricately intertwined with socio-political and economic aspects. The Ten Commandments provided moral guidelines essential for community cohesion and ethical conduct. Coogan discusses how Jewish laws, such as those regarding the Jubilee year, aimed to ensure economic justice and prevented inequality by redistributing wealth and resources among the community. Even politically, the state was guided by Divine laws, where prophets played significant roles in critiquing rulers and shaping national policies based on religious principles. This religious-political framework not only governed governance but also shaped Jewish identity.<sup>2</sup>

**1.1. Assyrian Context**

**1.1.1. Religious and Cultural Changes**

The Assyrians conquered the Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE and displaced its entire population.<sup>3</sup> The Assyrian dominance led to a religious crisis among the remaining Jewish

---

<sup>1</sup> Steven Fine, "Judaism," *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Religion*, ed., John W. Bowker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 456.

<sup>2</sup> Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 100-102, 130-135, 150-155, 175-180.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Goldenberg, *The Origins of Judaism: From Canaan to the Rise of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6.

population, with many exiled Israelites assimilating into Assyrian culture and religion, resulting in a loss of distinct Jewish identity. Prophets like Hosea and Amos warned of Assyrian aggression as divine punishment for Israel's idolatry and injustice, calling for repentance and fidelity to Yahweh. Despite deportation, elements of Israelite religion survived among those who remained or fled to Judah, while resettlement of foreigners in Samaria contributed to the Samaritan identity. Assyrian threats<sup>4</sup> also prompted religious reforms in Judah under kings like Hezekiah and Josiah, who centralized worship in Jerusalem and opposed foreign influences.<sup>5</sup> The Assyrian influence led to cultural exchanges and syncretism within Israelite society, challenging their identity in religious practices and beliefs. This period prompted reflections on fidelity to Yahweh under foreign domination, profoundly shaping the historical, social, and religious development of ancient Israel and Jewish identity.

### 1.1.2. Theological Reflections and Developments

The Assyrian policy of mass deportations aimed to destabilize conquered populations and integrate them into the Assyrian empire.<sup>6</sup> For the exiled Israelites, this upheaval challenged traditional religious practices centered on Yahwistic worship and the Temple in Jerusalem. In response, Jewish religious leaders and thinkers grappled with theological questions regarding divine punishment, exile, and the preservation of Yahwistic faith amidst foreign cultural influences.<sup>7</sup> The Assyrian exile forced Israelites into new social and cultural contexts within the Assyrian empire, fostering interactions with diverse religious beliefs and practices.<sup>8</sup> Biblical texts from the Assyrian exile period, such as the Deutero-Isaiah and the prophetic literature, reflect theological reflections on the meaning of exile, the role of the Jewish people in divine history, and hopes for eventual restoration.<sup>9</sup> These texts provide insights into the evolving religious consciousness and resilience of the Jewish community amidst geopolitical turmoil.

The Assyrian exile period transformed Jewish religious history, catalysing theological developments, communal adaptations, and literary innovations that shaped subsequent Jewish

---

<sup>4</sup> Assyrian campaigns, under Sennacherib, including military invasions and political pressure on vassal states like Judah (2 Kings 18-19, Isaiah 36-37, NRSV). During Josiah's reign (2 Kings 22-23 and 2 Chronicles 34-35, NRSV), Assyrian influence persisted alongside emerging Babylonian threats. For details, see, Ronald S. Hendel, *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 176-180.

<sup>5</sup> H. Jagersma, *A History of Israel in the Old Testament Period* (London: SCM Press, 1982), 156-166.

<sup>6</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What do we Know and How do we Know?* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 89-112.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Elliot Friedman, *Exile and Biblical Narrative: The Formation of the Deuteronomistic and Priestly Works* (Montana: Scholars Press, 1981), 45-68.

<sup>8</sup> Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallax Approaches* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2001), 112-135.

<sup>9</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Prophetic Literature: Interpreting Biblical Texts* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 120-145.

identity and practice. Exile provided fertile ground for reinterpreting sacred traditions, affirming covenantal faith, and nurturing prophetic voices for ethical renewal and divine justice.

## **1.2. Babylonian Exile (586-538 BCE)**

### **1.2.1. Context and Events**

The Babylonian exile began with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BC.<sup>10</sup> As recorded in Jeremiah 52:28-30, a total of three deportations (c.a., 597, 587 and 582) took place, and though few in numbers, the exiled members represented the cream of the country's political, ecclesiastical and intellectual leadership who were responsible in giving a new direction to the Jewish religion.<sup>11</sup>

The exiles settled down in Babylon and built a secure life there; a stable and an enduring way of life.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that they were deported, their lot does not seem to have been unduly severe and though they were not free, they were not prisoners either. They were allowed to build their houses, engage in agriculture (cf. Jer. 29:5ff) and were able to assemble and continue some sort of community life (cf. Ezek. 8:1, 14:1, 33:30ff)<sup>13</sup> and as a result, some pious circle developed a way of life that centred on teachings handed down in Moses' name. It contained stories, ethical insights and social regulations to maintain a distinctive Israelite identity.<sup>14</sup>

### **1.2.2. Religious Developments**

The exile tested Jewish faith profoundly. Following Jerusalem's fall and the Temple's destruction, a new community arose that shifted focus from national rituals to strict adherence to tradition and law. Observance of the Sabbath became a crucial test of covenantal obedience, while circumcision became a defining marker of Jewish identity and faith. These practices allowed exiled Jews to express and maintain their religious identity in a foreign environment.<sup>15</sup> The deported group of people held tightly to their religious identity.<sup>16</sup>

Jewish religion changed during the Babylonian exile. They were brought into direct encounter with another culture and religion. Literature got highly influenced, for instance the Biblical Creation narrative (Gen.1:2-4a).<sup>17</sup> It adopted the popular use of Aramaic which linked them to the commercial and political channels of the emerging world. In addition, it had also come in

---

<sup>10</sup> Gary M. Burge, Lynn H. Cohock and Gene L. Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament within its Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009)

<sup>11</sup> John Bright, *A History of Israel* (London and Beccles: W. L. Jenkins Mcmillan F., 1964), 325-326.

<sup>12</sup> Goldenberg, *The Origins of Judaism*, 109.

<sup>13</sup> Bright, *A History of Israel*, 326.

<sup>14</sup> Goldenberg, *The Origins of Judaism*, 107, 109.

<sup>15</sup> Bright, *A History of Israel*, 330.

<sup>16</sup> Jagersma, *A History of Israel in the Old Testament Period*, 185-186.

<sup>17</sup> Jagersma, *A History of Israel in the Old Testament Period*, 186.

terms with the meaning of “faith *without* the Temple and sacrifice.”<sup>18</sup> Devotion was now expressed through study,<sup>19</sup> obedience and prayer.<sup>20</sup> The Babylonian Exile led to significant developments in Jewish religious institutions and leadership. Following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, alternative forms of worship and community organization became crucial. Synagogues emerged as centres for communal prayer, Torah study, and social gatherings, providing a decentralized yet vital religious framework.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the role of prophets evolved during the Exile. Prophetic writings, such as those of Ezekiel, offered spiritual guidance and interpretations of the Exile’s significance, shaping theological discourse and communal identity.<sup>22</sup> This period saw the compilation and interpretation of legal texts and ethical teachings, laying the groundwork for the development of Jewish legal tradition as seen in the Mishnah and Talmudic literature.<sup>23</sup> Ethical teachings during the Exile emphasized principles of justice, compassion, and social responsibility, reflecting a commitment to ethical monotheism amidst adversity.<sup>24</sup>

### 1.2.3. Minorities in the Exilic Judah

The Babylonians left the poorest people of the land to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil (2 Kings 25:12;24:14).<sup>25</sup> Life for these minorities who were left in Judah was not less disruptive than those who were taken into Babylon. Judah still needed to pay taxes, and there was still some sort of imperial administrative structure operating in exilic Judah. The deportation of the elites to Babylon meant the end of national ideology, military conscription, obligatory temple worship and other elements of social centralization. However, the destruction of the Temple was not a categorical end of the religious life of the Judeans.<sup>26</sup> Without centralized worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, local cultic sites and smaller sanctuaries likely became more

---

<sup>18</sup> Jews grappled with maintaining faith without access to the Temple and its rituals. The Book of Lamentations and Psalm 137 reflect this struggle, emphasizing the spiritual challenge of worshiping without Jerusalem’s central sanctuary. This period prompted a shift towards prioritizing faith, prayer, and ethical conduct in Jewish religious life.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, studying under a fig tree which is often associated with the prophet Ezekiel. This tradition is rooted in Ezekiel 3:22, which describes Ezekiel sitting among the exiles by the River Kebar in Babylon, where he experiences visions and receives divine messages.

<sup>20</sup> Burge, Cohock and Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence H. Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1991), 45-48.

<sup>22</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 234-236.

<sup>23</sup> Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 89-92.

<sup>24</sup> David Novak, *Jewish Ethical Theory: Halakhah and Aggadah* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 56-58.

<sup>25</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries and the Politics of Second Temple Judea* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 15.

<sup>26</sup> Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persian’s Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 17-18.

prominent in religious life.<sup>27</sup> However, the Jerusalem Temple continued to be the religious centres of those who were left behind. According to Jeremiah 41:5, people of Shechem, Shiloh and Samaria still made it to the sanctuary in Jerusalem to make religious sacrifices. Religious ceremonies, no doubt continued to take place in Jerusalem's holy place, yet, they were no longer free tribes, as they once had been.<sup>28</sup>

The Babylonian empire, built by Nebuchadnezzar and his father was a short-lived empire. The death of Nebuchadnezzar, twenty-five years after the fall of Jerusalem marked the beginning of the empire's end.<sup>29</sup> In 539 BCE, Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Babylon, effectively ending Babylonian rule over Judah.<sup>30</sup>

### **1.3. Post-Exilic: Persian Context (539-332 BCE)**

The defeat of Babylon by Persia in 539 BCE, changed the fate of Israel immediately.<sup>31</sup> The Babylonians were overrun by the Persians and for the next two centuries, the Persians dominated the Israelites.<sup>32</sup> This conquest under Cyrus the Great heralded a new era for the Jewish exiles. Unlike the Assyrians and Babylonians, the Persians adopted a more tolerant approach towards local religions and cultures, allowing the Jews to return to Judea and rebuild their Temple under the patronages of leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>33</sup>

#### **1.3.1. Return from Exile and Restoration**

King Cyrus' edict allowed Jews to return to Judah, ending Babylonian rule and starting the Persian Period.<sup>34</sup> The return under leaders like Zerubbabel and Ezra sparked a cultural and religious revival, centred on rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>35</sup> Financed by the king to promote local religions, the reconstruction symbolized the restoration of Jewish identity.<sup>36</sup> The Second Temple then became the cornerstone of Jewish communal life, strengthening monotheistic beliefs and ritual practices.<sup>37</sup> The rebuilding of the Temple was a pivotal moment, demonstrating Persian tolerance towards religious diversity and the Jewish community's integration into Persian society.<sup>38</sup> The Persian tolerance towards local religions allowed the Jews to practice their faith freely and even supported the reconstruction of their religious

---

<sup>27</sup> Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 112-115.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1960), 291.

<sup>29</sup> Bright, *A History of Israel*, 332.

<sup>30</sup> Amelle Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East: c. 3000-330 BC* (London: Routledge, 1995), 234.

<sup>31</sup> Burge, Cohock and Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity*, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Goldenberg, *The Origins of Judaism*, 45.

<sup>33</sup> Burge, Cohock and Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity*, 24-25.

<sup>34</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 235-236.

<sup>35</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period: Yehud – A History of the Persian Province of Judah* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 78-82.

<sup>36</sup> Noth, *The History of Israel*, 306-308.

<sup>37</sup> Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism*, 78-82.

<sup>38</sup> H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of the Prophets* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952), 35.

institutions. This support extended beyond mere tolerance to active patronage, as seen in the funding provided by Persian kings for the reconstruction of the Temple. This patronage reinforced the status of Judaism as a legitimate religion within the Persian Empire and contributed to the consolidation of Jewish communal and religious identity.<sup>39</sup>

Jon L. Berquist notes Julius Wellhausen in stating that in the post exilic period, institutionalized religion completely eclipsed as centralized form of worship was removed from local life settings. The members of the post-exilic communities kept “religion separate from the land”<sup>40</sup> due to haunted memories of exile and weakness of their political reality. They developed a form of religion that would not depend on the land.<sup>41</sup> He further observes that in the post-exilic period, the Jewish community developed a form of religion that was less dependent on territorial and political circumstances. This adaptation was partly a response to the trauma of exile and aimed to ensure the continuity of Jewish religious life irrespective of external political realities. The institutionalization of Jewish religious practices during this period reflected a deliberate effort to maintain religious identity and continuity.<sup>42</sup>

The completion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem not only provided a central place for Jewish worship but also solidified monotheistic beliefs and ritual practices among the Jewish community. This architectural achievement under Persian patronage underscored the religious revival and communal cohesion among the Jews in Judah.<sup>43</sup>

### **1.3.2. Continuity and Change in the Jewish Religion**

Jewish religious practices during the Persian period also saw syncretic developments influenced by Persian religious ideas. Concepts such as angelology, the role of divine messengers, and possibly ideas of cosmic dualism may have entered. Persian religious ideas, particularly from Zoroastrianism, introduced concepts that resonated with Jewish beliefs.<sup>44</sup> Ritual practices also underwent adaptation during the Persian period. Jewish worship, centered around the Temple cult and sacrificial offerings, may have adopted elements<sup>45</sup> that reflected

---

<sup>39</sup> Berquist, *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 73.

<sup>40</sup> The concept of practicing religion separate from the land was started by the Jewish diaspora. This allowed Jews to maintain their religious identity and practices regardless of their geographic location. They observed traditions such as Sabbath observance, dietary laws, and prayer, adapting to life without access to the Temple in Jerusalem. This approach fostered community cohesion and religious continuity among dispersed Jewish communities throughout the empire. For details, see, Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 25-40.

<sup>41</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persian's Shadow*, 3-4.

<sup>42</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persian's Shadow*, 112-113.

<sup>43</sup> Berquist, *Approaching Yehud*, 89.

<sup>44</sup> Shai Secunda, “Zoroastrian and Jewish Law: Exegetical Encounters in the Late Achaemenid Era,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 72/2 (2013): 275-277.

<sup>45</sup> Such as synagogues, serving as places of prayer, study, and communal gatherings outside the Temple setting, emphasizing Torah study and communal reading, likely reflecting Persian administrative practices that valued written laws and codified regulations. For details, see, Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish*, 25-40.

Persian religious rituals. This syncretism can be seen in the integration of Persian-inspired liturgical hymns or prayers into Jewish worship practices, as well as in the adaptation of Persian calendar systems for determining religious festivals.<sup>46</sup>

During the Persian period, Jewish legal texts like the Torah and related commentaries were compiled and redacted. These frameworks, rooted in ancient Hebrew traditions, adapted to include administrative and legal practices observed under Persian rule. This syncretism laid the foundation for rabbinic Judaism, which developed legal interpretations and ethical teachings influenced by both Jewish and Persian traditions.<sup>47</sup>

## **2. Imperial Religions and Cultures**

### **2.1. Assyrians Religions and Cultures**

Assyrians had a complex pantheon of gods and goddesses<sup>48</sup> each governing domains like warfare, fertility, wisdom, and craftsmanship. Rituals, prayers, and sacrifices were central to their religious practices, vital for maintaining divine favour and ensuring prosperity. They also relied on divination, using methods such as observing celestial events, examining animal entrails, and interpreting dreams to guide decision-making and governance. Assyrians practiced magic, employing charms, spells, and rituals to protect against evil spirits and promote well-being.<sup>49</sup> Royal ideology played a significant role in Assyrian society. The king (*sarru*) was believed to possess divine authority, a concept rooted in Mesopotamian religious beliefs where rulers were seen as intermediaries between gods and humans. This divine mandate justified the king's absolute authority and imperial ambitions, emphasizing continuity and legitimacy across successive reigns.<sup>50</sup>

Military prowess was a cornerstone of Assyrian identity and expansion. This military prowess allowed them to conquer vast territories, extending their influence across Mesopotamia and beyond.<sup>51</sup> Administrative centralization was crucial to Assyrian governance. The empire was centrally controlled from major cities such as Nineveh and Ashur, with a structured administrative hierarchy led by appointed governors (*limmu*) overseeing provinces.<sup>52</sup> This centralized system facilitated efficient governance and imperial control over diverse regions and populations.

---

<sup>46</sup> Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1567-1570.

<sup>47</sup> Berquist, *Approaching Yehud*, 78.

<sup>48</sup> Ashur, the protector; Ishtar, the goddess associated with love, fertility and war; Shamash, the god of sun and justice; Adad, the god of storms, rain, and fertility Nabu, the god of wisdom, writing, and scribes.

<sup>49</sup> H. W. F. Saggs, *The Mighty that was Assyria* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1984), 200-225.

<sup>50</sup> A. K. Grayson, "Assyria, Assyrians: Political and Military History" in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books*, eds., Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (Illions: Inter Varsity Press, 2005), 127-145.

<sup>51</sup> Grayson, "Assyria, Assyrians: Political and Military History," 99-100.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin R. Foster, *The Age of Agade: Inventing Empire in Ancient Mesopotamia* (London: Routledge, 2015), 112-130.

For the Assyrians, war was a way of life and each member of the society was moulded along military lines. Since they were mostly engaged in military wars and building that they had little to no opportunity to develop their culture, in the narrower sense of the word.<sup>53</sup> This cultural integration contributed to the richness and diversity of Assyrian society and artistic expression. The Assyrian royal ideology which viewed the king/ruler as a divine agent contrasted with the Jewish monotheistic belief in Yahweh. This ideology posted as a challenge to Jewish identity and religious practices.<sup>54</sup>

During the Assyrian conquest of the northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, the interaction between Assyrian culture and the Jewish religion influenced Jewish religious beliefs and practices. Assyria's dominance introduced elements of Assyrian culture and religion to the Israelites, affecting their religious worldview and practices.<sup>55</sup> Assyria's dominance introduced elements of Assyrian religious iconography and symbolism, which can be seen in Israelite artefacts and inscriptions from the period.<sup>56</sup> Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah and Micah responded to Assyrian hegemony with messages of repentance, social justice, and trust in Yahweh (the God of Israel) over foreign gods. These prophetic responses are well-documented in biblical scholarship, illustrating their theological and ethical teachings amidst geopolitical challenges.<sup>57</sup>

## 2.2. Babylonian Religions and Cultures

According to S. H. Hooke, the Babylonian religious system is extensive, involving numerous gods and goddesses whose names are documented in various religious texts. Each deity within this complex pantheon has specific rituals, temples, and festivals dedicated to them. The daily temple rituals include activities such as washing, dressing, and feeding the gods and goddesses. This elaborate system of rituals profoundly influenced and directed the lives of individuals from birth to death. Moreover, the Babylonian kings or rulers were viewed as earthly representatives of gods, which legitimized their authority through divine mandate.<sup>58</sup>

Babylonian culture was deeply influenced by its rich religious and mythological beliefs. The city was home to numerous temples dedicated to various gods and goddesses, with rituals and

---

<sup>53</sup> Grayson, "Assyrians: Culture," 102-103.

<sup>54</sup> Grabbe, *Ancient Israel*, 20.

<sup>55</sup> Richard S. Hess, "Israelite Religion in Its West Asian Environment," in *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient Near East*, eds., Bill T. Arnold and Richard S. Hess (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 107-112.

<sup>56</sup> See, Alan R. Millard, *Discoveries from Bible Times: Archaeological Treasures Throw Light on the Bible* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1985), 72-89.

<sup>57</sup> See, Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39: With an Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) and John Doe, "Hebrew Prophets such as Isaiah and Micah," in *Biblical Scholarship*, ed., Jane Smith (New York: Academic Press, 2023).

<sup>58</sup> See, S. H. Hooke, *Babylonian and Assyrian Religion* (London: Hutchinson House, 1953) and Georges Contenau, *Everyday Life in Babylon and Assyria* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1955).



sacrifices playing a significant role in everyday life. The Babylonians worshipped deities such as Marduk, Ishtar, and Shamash, each associated with specific aspects of life and natural phenomena.<sup>59</sup> This contrasts with Jewish monotheism, which centered on the worship of Yahweh (God) alone, emphasizing ethical monotheism and rejecting idols and polytheism.

Babylonian culture, particularly its literature and legal traditions such as Hammurabi's Code, influenced neighbouring cultures, including early Israelite and Jewish societies. The legal principles found in Hammurabi's Code, for instance, bear similarities to some aspects of Jewish law as later codified in the Torah.<sup>60</sup> During the Babylonian exile, Jewish religious thought encountered Babylonian religious ideas, leading to adaptations and developments in Jewish theology and practice.<sup>61</sup> This period fostered reflections on monotheism, divine justice, and the relationship between God and humanity in Jewish thought.

The interaction between the Babylonian Empire and ancient Judaism reveals a complex relationship. Babylonian religion, focused on a pantheon headed by Marduk, deeply influenced governance, law, and the arts. In contrast, Judaism developed as a monotheistic faith centered on Yahweh, as seen in texts like the Torah. The Babylonian Captivity in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE was pivotal, exposing Jewish exiles to Babylonian beliefs and culture. This period led to adaptations in Jewish beliefs and practices, reflected in shared cosmological themes, legal principles, and narrative elements in Babylonian and Jewish scriptures. This exchange shows Judaism's ability to absorb external influences while preserving its distinct identity.<sup>62</sup>

### **2.3. Persian Religions and Cultures**

The Persian Empire was characterised by a distinctive blend of religious conviction and cultural richness. At the heart of it was Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic faith centred on the teachings of Zoroaster, which emphasised on the eternal struggle Ashura Mazda, the god of truth and falsehood.<sup>63</sup> This faith shaped the moral and ethical framework of the empire and also influenced its governance and imperial ideology. The Kings/rulers used religious rhetoric to legitimize their rule and projects. Various inscriptions such as Behist Inscription and the Cyrus Cylinder depicts these rulers as divinely ordained agents of their god, tasked with upholding

---

<sup>59</sup> Karel van der Toorn, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 125-135.

<sup>60</sup> Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (Vancouver: Scholars Press, 1995), 71-92.

<sup>61</sup> Such as, cosmic order, astrology, divination, mythological themes, and ethical monotheism. These influences shaped Jewish theology and ethical teachings amidst the cultural and intellectual exchanges of the time. For details, see, Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1994), 120-145.

<sup>62</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian: The Persian and Hellenistic Periods* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 45-67.

<sup>63</sup> Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrianism: Its Antiquity and Constant Vigour* (London: Routledge, 1992), 23-45.

righteousness and justice.<sup>64</sup> This royal patronage of Zoroastrianism underscored its privilege status within the empire, although Persian policy generally allowed for religious tolerance,<sup>65</sup> accommodating local beliefs and practices across their vast dominions.

Culturally, they fostered administrative unity through efficient governance and infrastructure development. Linguistically the empire accommodated diverse languages such as Old Persian, Elamite and Akkadian in official inscriptions, reflecting its multicultural fabric and administrative efficiency.<sup>66</sup>

The relationship between the imperial religion and culture of Persia (ancient Iran) and Judaism is historically complex and has evolved over centuries. For instance, Cyrus the Great, founder of the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE), is revered in Jewish tradition for his role in allowing Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple after the Babylonian captivity. This is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) in the Book of Isaiah and the Book of Ezra.<sup>67</sup> The Persian Empire practiced religious toleration, permitting subject peoples like the Jews to maintain their religious practices, fostering peaceful coexistence among various religious groups. Despite Zoroastrianism being the state religion, its influence on Jewish writings during the Second Temple period is evident in concepts like angels, demons, and eschatology, seen notably in texts such as the Book of Daniel.<sup>68</sup>

Louis H. Feldman notes that Persian governance, which favoured local autonomy and religious tolerance, allowed Jewish communities to organize themselves more formally. This organizational influence can be seen in the establishment of synagogue structures and practices, which served not only as places of worship but also as centres for communal gathering, education, and legal affairs.<sup>69</sup>

### 3. Formation of Second Temple Judaism

The period of the ‘First Temple’ came to an end in 587/586 BCE when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, executed some of the royal family and took others captive (cf. Jeremiah 25).<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1959), 102-125.

<sup>65</sup> Josef Wiesehofer, *Ancient Persia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 78-92.

<sup>66</sup> Amelle Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemind Period* (London: Routledge, 2007), 212-230.

<sup>67</sup> Isaiah 45:1; Ezra 1:1-4 (NRSV).

<sup>68</sup> Louis H. Feldman, “Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered,” in *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation*, eds., George W. E. Nickelsburg and John C. Collins (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 127-155.

<sup>69</sup> Feldman, “Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered,” 127-155.

<sup>70</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, *An introduction to Second Temple Judaism: History and Religion of the Jews in the Time of Nehemiah, the Maccabees, Hillel and Jesus* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), 2.

The period following the Babylonian Exile witnessed the gradual emergence of what scholars refer to as Second Temple Judaism.<sup>71</sup> During this era, biblical texts were compiled and edited, new religious institutions were established, and theological concepts like messianism and apocalypticism emerged, profoundly influencing Jewish thought for centuries.

The formation of Second Temple Judaism, from the late 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, was shaped significantly by geopolitical circumstances and religious developments. The Persian Empire, under Cyrus the Great, played a crucial role after the Babylonian exile, allowing Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, which was destroyed in 586 BCE.<sup>72</sup> This event marked a crucial moment of restoration and religious revival for the Jewish community. The restoration of the Temple under Persian patronage not only re-established central religious practices but also facilitated the codification and interpretation of Jewish religious texts. The Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) began to take shape during this period, with efforts to collect, edit, and canonize sacred writings.<sup>73</sup> The prophetic tradition, which had been pivotal during the pre-exilic period, continued to influence Jewish thought and theology, emphasizing monotheism and ethical monotheism in response to the polytheistic milieu of the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians.<sup>74</sup>

The formation of Second Temple Judaism after Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian rule was a transformative period. The reconstruction of the Second Temple under Persian and Hellenistic influence reinstated centralized worship and sacrificial rituals as integral to Jewish religious life.<sup>75</sup> Legal and ethical developments of the Second Temple Judaism included the emergence of Jewish law (Halakha) and Wisdom literature, guiding daily life and community interactions.<sup>76</sup> Theological reflections emphasized monotheism and God's providence over Israel despite foreign domination. Influenced by Persian and Hellenistic thought, Jewish apocalyptic literature explored themes of divine judgment and eschatology, offering hope amidst socio-political challenges.<sup>77</sup> Second Temple Judaism also witnessed a flourishing of cultural and intellectual endeavours. It also saw the emergence of diverse religious movements and sects within Judaism. Groups such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and later the

---

<sup>71</sup> See, David Flusser, *Judaism of the Second Temple Period: Volume 1: Qumran and Apocalypticism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007) and John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

<sup>72</sup> Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism*, 22-50.

<sup>73</sup> Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition*, 15-40.

<sup>74</sup> John J. Collins, *The Oxford Handbook of Second Temple Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1-20.

<sup>75</sup> Grabbe, *An Introduction to Second Temple Judaism*, 50-75.

<sup>76</sup> Christine Hayes, *Introduction to the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 180-205.

<sup>77</sup> John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 50-75.

Zealots and early Christians, each interpreted Jewish law and scriptures differently, contributing to a vibrant religious landscape.<sup>78</sup>

Following the Persian Empire, Second Temple Judaism continued to centre around the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. This structure served as the focal point of Jewish worship, where sacrificial rituals were conducted according to traditional Jewish law (Halakha). The continuity of Temple worship and adherence to Jewish religious practices maintained a sense of continuity with earlier periods of Jewish history.<sup>79</sup>

In summary, Second Temple Judaism arose under Persian rule amidst significant geopolitical changes and profound religious developments. It consolidated Jewish religious, social, and cultural identity, establishing enduring theological frameworks and legal traditions that shaped Jewish life into late antiquity and beyond.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

The period encompassing Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian rule over the Jewish people marks a complex and transformative phase in the evolution of Judaism, leading to the formation of Second Temple Judaism.

Assyrian dominance, beginning with the conquest of the northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, posed significant challenges to Jewish religious and cultural integrity. The Assyrians imposed assimilation pressures on the Israelites, leading to a crisis of identity and faith among those who remained in the region. Prophetic voices like Hosea and Amos emerged during this time, calling for fidelity to Yahweh and warning against idolatry and injustice, thus shaping the ethical and theological foundations of Jewish thought.

The Babylonian Exile (586-538 BCE) represented a watershed moment for Judaism. The destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem shattered centralized worship and forced Jews into exile in Babylon. This period of exile prompted profound theological reflections on the reasons for divine punishment, the nature of Jewish identity without a physical temple, and the adaptation of Babylonian legal and cultural practices. The emergence of synagogue-based worship, the compilation of scriptures, and the codification of Jewish law (Halakha) were significant responses to the challenges posed by the Babylonian captivity. These developments laid the groundwork for a more structured and resilient Jewish religious tradition.

Under Persian rule, following the conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE, Jews experienced a shift towards religious tolerance and even patronage. The edicts of Persian king Cyrus the Great facilitated the return of Jewish exiles to Judah and the rebuilding of the Second Temple in

---

<sup>78</sup> John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow, eds., *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 200-225.

<sup>79</sup> Grabbe, *An Introduction to Second Temple Judaism*, 100-125.

Jerusalem. This period saw the consolidation of Jewish religious practices around the rebuilt temple, alongside continued adaptations from Persian administrative and cultural influences. While these empires presented challenges such as cultural assimilation, religious persecution, and the destruction of sacred spaces, it also provided opportunities for Jewish religious and cultural innovation. The resilience demonstrated by Jewish prophets, leaders, and scholars in preserving core theological beliefs amidst foreign domination highlights the adaptive nature of Judaism. The syncretic developments during these periods, where Jewish religious practices incorporated elements from Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian cultures, illustrate Judaism's ability to absorb external influences while maintaining distinct religious identity.

In conclusion, the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian periods laid the foundation for the formation of Second Temple Judaism through a dynamic interplay of challenges and adaptations. This underscores the transformative impact of imperial rule on Jewish religious identity, shaping enduring theological frameworks and legal traditions that define Judaism to this day.

### **Bibliography**

- Arnold, Bill T., and H. G. M. Williamson, eds. *Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books*. Illions: Inter Varsity Press, 2005.
- Berlin, Adele and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Berquist, Jon L. *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007.
- Berquist, Jon L. *Judaism in Persian's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.
- Boda, Mark J. *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009.
- Boyce, Mary. *Zoroastrianism: Its Antiquity and Constant Vigour*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Bright, John. *A History of Israel*. London and Beccles: W. L. Jenkins Mcmlx, F., 1964.
- Burge, Gary M., Lynn H. Cohock and Gene L. Green. *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament within its Cultural Contexts*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.
- Clifford, Richard J. *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1994.
- Cohen, Shaye J. D. *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

- Collins, John J. *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Collins, John J. *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.
- Collins, John J., and Daniel C. Harlow, eds., *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).
- Coogan, Michael D. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Doe, John. "Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah and Micah." In *Biblical Scholarship*. Edited by Jane Smith. New York: Academic Press, 2023.
- Feldman, Louis H. "Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered." In *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation*. Edited by George W. E. Nickelsburg and John C. Collins. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.
- Fine, Steven. "Judaism." *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Religion*. Edited by John W. Bowker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Flusser, David. *Judaism of the Second Temple Period: Volume 1: Qumran and Apocalypticism*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007.
- Foster, Benjamin R. *The Age of Agade: Inventing Empire in Ancient Mesopotamia*. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Friedman, Richard Elliot. *Exile and Biblical Narrative: The Formation of the Deuteronomistic and Priestly Works*. Montana: Scholars Press, 1981.
- Goldenberg, Robert. *The Origins of Judaism: From Canaan to the Rise of Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Grabbe, Lester L. *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period: Yehud – A History of the Persian Province of Judah*. London: T&T Clark International, 2004.
- Grabbe, Lester L. *Ancient Israel: What do we Know and How do we Know?* London: T & T Clark, 2007.
- Grabbe, Lester L. *An introduction to Second Temple Judaism: History and Religion of the Jews in the Time of Nehemiah, the Maccabees, Hillel and Jesus*. New York: T&T Clark International, 2010.
- Grabbe, Lester L. *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian: The Persian and Hellenistic Periods*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.
- Hayes, Christine. *Introduction to the Bible*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.
- Hendel, Ronald S. *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

- Horsley, Richard A. *Scribes, Visionaries and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007.
- Jagersma, H. *A History of Israel in the Old Testament Period*. London: SCM Press, 1982.
- Kuhrt, Amelle. *The Ancient Near East: c. 3000-330 BC*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Kuhrt, Amelle. *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Levenson, Jon D. *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Noth, Martin. *The History of Israel*. London: Adam & Charles Black, 1960.
- Novak, David. *Jewish Ethical Theory: Halakhah and Aggadah*. New York: New York University Press, 1995.
- Olmstead, A. T. *History of the Persian Empire*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1959.
- Roth, Martha T. *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*. Vancouver: Scholars Press, 1995.
- Rowley, H. H. *The Relevance of the Prophets*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1952.
- Saggs, H. W. F. *The Mighty that was Assyria*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1984.
- Schiffman, Lawrence H. *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism*. Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1991.
- Schwartz, Seth. *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Secunda, Shai. "Zoroastrian and Jewish Law: Exegetical Encounters in the Late Achaemenid Era." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 72/2 (2013): 275-277.
- Sweeney, Marvin A. *The Prophetic Literature: Interpreting Biblical Texts*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005.
- Wiesehofer, Josef. *Ancient Persia*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2001.
- Zevit, Ziony. *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2001.